

IT'S OUR BUSINESS

Addressing addiction and mental health in the workplace

Information for Leaders

Workplace health model

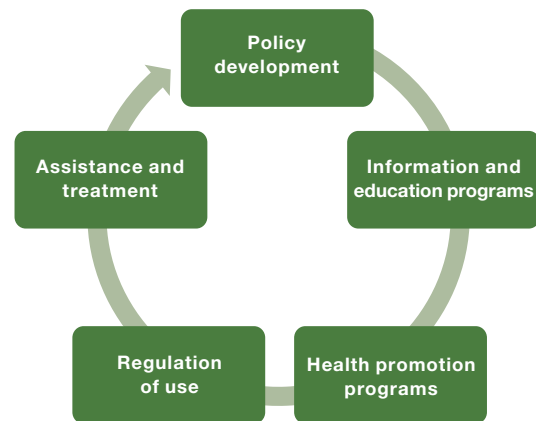
Among the goals of workplace health promotion are preventing the development of addiction and mental health problems, and reducing the harm associated with them. Workplace health refers to an organization's ability to promote and maintain the physical and mental health of its employees. It is also about reducing risks to employees' health and wellness through safe work practices, healthy work environments and the responsible hosting of company events.

More than 67% of the population over the age of 15 are in the workforce, and spend an average of 60% of their waking hours in the workplace, or have meaningful involvement with other workplace environments, including schools, apprentice and vocational programs, and health-care settings.¹ The workplace has a strong influence on employee health and wellness and, in turn, affects the family and community. A healthy workplace is one where employees enjoy a safe and healthy work environment, where they have strong and supportive working relationships that give them a sense of control and influence over what happens to them, and where they are encouraged and supported to look after their own health, both at work and at home.

Intervention strategies

Workplace programs are more effective when an organizational, comprehensive approach is taken. Tim Stockwell and others² outline how interventions to reduce the risk posed by substance use in the workplace fall into five broad categories. These categories can

be adapted to fit with other workplace health initiatives, including interventions aimed at mental health and tobacco use.



Policy development

A written company policy signals a corporate commitment to substance abuse prevention, mental health promotion and employee health. Corporate policy provides the basis for further interventions. When developing a policy, it is important to address the following:

1. consultation with the workforce during development
2. universal application
3. adaptation to the specific organization
4. comprehensive coverage and specific procedures for responding to different issues (e.g., drug use in the workplace)
5. education on, and awareness of, company policies

6. education and training on the implementation of company policies
7. pace implementation
8. evaluation of stated objectives

Information and education programs

A key aspect of providing a comprehensive approach to any intervention or program within the workplace is providing health information to all employees (e.g., information on why alcohol and other drug use can be a problem in the workplace setting). Education programs can focus on the company's policies, health risks and other problems associated with not addressing health issues, and tools employees can use to assess their own or others' health behaviour. Education programs can also provide information on where to go for help.

Health promotion programs

Health promotion programs have the ability to change health environments and teach participants how to improve or maintain their health, for example by making healthier choices related to substance misuse, stress management and exercise.

Regulation of use

Regulation of use has a number of functions, and may include measures such as banning alcohol and other drug use, and compliance alcohol and drug testing. For more information on drug testing and what to consider when choosing whether or not to have a drug testing policy, request the following handouts:

- Steps to Consider When Developing a Policy (Handout 1, Module 5)
- Alcohol and Drug Testing (Handout 2, Module 5)
- Making Policy Work (Handout 3, Module 5)

Assistance and treatment

Assistance and treatment commonly involves referring employees to an employee assistance program for help with issues such as alcohol and other drug use problems, and mental health issues.

References

1. Alberta Health Services–Workplace Health Team. (2011). *Workplace Health Improvement Project: Training manual*. Calgary, AB: Author.
2. Stockwell, T., Gruenewald, P., Toumbourou, J., & Loxley, W. (Eds.). (2005). *Preventing harmful substance use: The evidence base for policy and practice*. Chichester, England: Wiley.

For more information

Alberta Health Services, Addiction and Mental Health offices offer a range of prevention and treatment services to assist businesses in managing workplace addiction and mental health concerns. For more information, and to find an addiction and mental health services office near you, please call the 24-hour Addiction Helpline at 1-866-332-2322 or the 24-hour Mental Health Helpline at 1-877-303-2642. For more workplace-specific resources, please visit: <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/2672.asp>



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Business case for workplace health

Why the workplace?

The workplace, where people spend an average of 60% of their waking hours, greatly affects physical, mental and social well-being. There is conclusive evidence that the infrastructure of the workplace can provide a support network that will encourage and promote healthy lifestyle practices at both the individual and organizational level. There are other key reasons why workplaces are an ideal setting to promote health:

- Workplaces have access to a large number of people on a regular basis and can provide ongoing support to employees.
- Workplaces have access to groups who may be hard to reach otherwise (e.g., minority groups and people who do not visit doctors and other health professionals regularly).
- Workplaces are convenient places for people to get information and support.
- Workplaces can provide the necessary supportive social environment.

Reasons to invest in employee health

Workplace health programming has substantial positive effects on an organization's bottom line and the return on investment (ROI) can be significant.

A comprehensive approach to workplace health can help reduce both direct and indirect costs to an organization. Direct costs are those for which payments are made. These costs include health care costs (e.g., drug and hospital costs), insurance premiums, Workers' Compensation

Board (WCB) costs, and recruitment and retention costs. Indirect costs are those for which resources are lost. These costs include productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism.

The benefits of workplace health programming for employees include increased health knowledge, increased job satisfaction, physical benefits, reduced risk of depression, more energy and less stress.

Benefits outweigh the costs

Substance abuse in the workplace is a concern for everyone: workers, leaders and managers, business owners and taxpayers. It is hard to measure the true economic costs of workplace substance use in Canada. It can be difficult, for instance, to directly link substance use with lowered productivity, absenteeism and accidents. As a result, the true costs of workplace substance abuse remain hidden. But there are human and economic costs to workplace substance abuse, both direct and indirect, and the costs are significant.

In 2002, annual productivity losses in Canada due to substance abuse were estimated at \$11.8 billion, which included

- \$4.1 billion for alcohol
- \$823.1 million for illegal drugs¹

This is the equivalent of 1.29% of Canada's gross domestic product (GDP) that year, or \$313 per Canadian.¹ These productivity losses say nothing about the cost of human suffering or other impacts on the workplace.

The Conference Board of Canada estimates that every employee who smokes costs a company \$3,396 per year through increased absenteeism, decreased productivity and the costs associated with maintaining and cleaning outside smoking areas.²

Alcohol abuse costs the Alberta economy \$855 million in lost productivity and \$407 million for direct health care services.³

Mental health in the workplace

Mental illness, which includes the most common mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety, costs the Canadian economy a staggering \$51 billion a year, with one-third of that due to lost productivity.⁴

According to the World Health Organization, depression will rank second only to heart disease as the leading cause of disability worldwide by the year 2020. Mental health problems and illnesses are rated as one of the top three drivers of both short- and long-term disability claims by more than 80% of Canadian employers.

Mental health problems and illnesses account for more than \$6 billion in lost productivity costs due to absenteeism and presenteeism.⁵

A recent stress-reduction program in a branch of the Halifax provincial government reduced absenteeism by 27%.⁶

Costs to organizations and return on investment (ROI)

Employee illness and injury add significantly to the cost of doing business. Employee absence alone costs Canadian businesses about \$8.6 billion per year.⁷ In addition, Canadian organizations report an annual absenteeism rate of 6.6 days lost per full-time employee, which equates to about 2.6% of their total payroll.

However, when workplace health programs are in place, employers have been able to cut costs while caring for their employees. There is a significant ROI for organizations that invest in their employees' health. Programs that demonstrated the largest returns focused on long-term behaviour change, used tailored communication methods and incorporated individualized counselling for high-risk individuals. Here are two examples:

1. Eight organizations in Halifax calculated an ROI of \$1.64 for every dollar invested in a comprehensive workplace wellness program.⁸
2. A Canadian government corporate wellness programs reported a return of \$1.95–\$3.75 per employee for every dollar spent.⁹

What you can do

As a leader, you have the front-line responsibility of making sure that employees report for work and remain fit to perform their duties safely and effectively. However, you aren't expected to do it alone. As a leader, you can take responsibility for initiating discussions or ensuring that training occurs so that all employees are clear about their responsibilities. You can also promote fitness for work by setting a good example and intervening when required.

Ultimately, a troubled employee is responsible for his or her own change. Your role is to identify the impact on his or her performance and identify sources of assistance. You and your employees are partners in obtaining good work performance. These tools will help you fulfill your role as a workplace role model and leader more effectively.



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